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ABSTRACT

Noting that most teachers find their own learning experiences in Reading Recovery very challenging, occasionally difficult, and sometimes frustrating, this paper explores the sources of these tensions and ways to maximize teacher learning while reducing anxiety and frustration. It discusses the nature of professional development (fidelity to Reading Recovery procedures versus teachers' professional expertise, and socialization versus collaboration); the nature of teaching (training versus inquiry, and conversation versus interrogation; and the nature of knowledge (problems versus answers, and facts versus transformation). The paper concludes that tensions arise as Reading Recovery trainers, teacher leaders, and teachers extend and refine the shared knowledge of its members, and it is the development of knowledge of the individual and the community that ensures that every experience carries its lesson. Contains 11 references, a table illustrating the tensions, and a figure. (RS)

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Supporting Teacher Learning: Reading Recovery as a Community of Practice.

by Robert M. Schwartz

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Network News

Fall 1998

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Supporting Teacher Learning:

Reading Recovery as a Community of Practice

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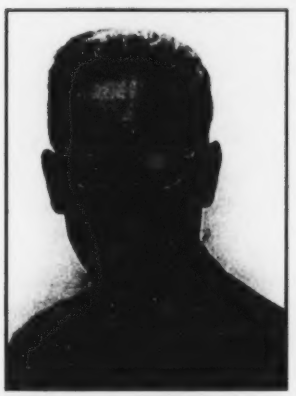
Maud'Dib learned rapidly because his first training was in how to learn. And the first lesson of all was the basic trust that he could learn. It is shocking to find how many people do not believe they can learn, and how many more believe learning to be difficult. Maud'Dib knew that every experience carries its lesson. (Herbert, 1965)

This favorite passage from the science fiction novel, *Dune*, nicely captures the sense of confidence and capability that Reading Recovery teachers convey to so many seemingly at-risk first grade students. Indeed, these students would be at-risk for future literacy problems without this first lesson that Reading Recovery teachers provide.

Most teachers find their participation in Reading Recovery to be the single most powerful and valuable learning experience of their professional lives. Yet despite this personal evaluation, Reading Recovery teachers often talk of the training as something they survived, rather than an opportunity they cherished. Teachers see their own learning experiences in Reading Recovery to be very challenging, occasionally difficult and, at times, extremely frustrating. This is true both during the initial training year and in subsequent continuing professional development. The conflict in these views reflects inherent tensions in the training, especially when time constraints and public accountability add to these tensions. My goal in this paper is to explore the sources of these tensions and ways to maximize teacher learning while reducing the anxiety and frustration that occasionally accompany this learning.

Palincsar et al. (1997) define a community of practice as a setting in which "learning and development occur as individuals participate in the sociocultural activities of a community, transforming their understanding, roles, and responsibilities as they collaborate with knowledgeable others in carrying out activities that are explicitly connected with the practices of the community" (p. 1). In this sense, Reading Recovery constitutes a large and coherent learning community. We can see our community of practice, its activity settings—the daily instruction of children in one-on-one sessions, group discussions of literacy observations and teaching decisions during demonstration lessons behind a one-way mirror, follow-up discussions of these lessons, colleague and teacher leader school visits, and professional conferences.



These activity settings provide ample opportunities for both children and teachers to learn about literacy and literacy instruction. Teachers learn about and refine their theories of literacy and literacy instruction as they work within the community of practice partially defined by these activity settings. In any community of practice that is large and rapidly expanding, there is bound to be a range of experience and understandings. Attempts to initiate new members into the community of practice will inevitably create tensions within the community. The amount of tension will vary depending on the extent that the standards and practices of the community differ from those of other communities from which new members are drawn or are jointly affiliated.

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In a recent conference for Reading Recovery university trainers and teacher leaders, Palincsar (1997) discussed possible tensions arising from different conceptions of the activity of teaching, the goal of professional development, and the nature of knowledge. I will expand on this discussion from my perspective as a Reading Recovery trainer. Table 1 contains a number of polar scales that represent possible sources of tension within and between individuals who comprise a community of practice. Discussion and reflection on each of these categories and scales can help us support teachers within the community to foster our primary goal of providing the most effective instruction for first grade students experiencing the greatest difficulty moving into literacy.

Table 1: Tensions Within A Community of Practice Model

Nature of Professional Development		
fidelity	versus	professionalism
socialization	versus	collaboration
Nature of Teaching		
training	versus	inquiry
conversation	versus	interrogation
Nature of Knowledge		
problems	versus	answers
facts	versus	transformations

Nature of Professional Development:

Fidelity versus Professionalism: One tension that is most apparent to individuals outside our community of practice is between fidelity to procedure versus valuing the professional expertise of teachers. This can be a tension for a community of practice with a research base. The community is partially defined by the lesson framework used by teachers in their daily work with children. Within that framework many of the procedures used are described in Clay's (1993) book, *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training*. These procedures have been shown to produce accelerated progress for thousands of at-risk children. Given the amount of time and energy that new members of the community devote to learning and understanding these procedures, it certainly appears that the community places heavy emphasis on procedural fidelity.

In Reading Recovery, as in many other professional endeavors, frameworks and procedures serve to organize the context in which professional decisions are made. However, if procedures are followed in a rigid or rote format, the role of professional expertise is diminished. A procedure may be effective, ineffective, or even counterproductive at different points in a child's program. There is no script for teaching children. Reading Recovery teachers are challenged to choose the 'clearest, easiest, most memorable examples' (Clay, 1993) to make teaching points that promote independent reading work and lead to accelerated literacy learning. Decisions about teaching points and examples can't be specified in advance and depend on a knowledgeable teacher making observations and decisions based on professional expertise (Schwartz, 1997).

Many beginning reading programs provide teachers with a choice among several activities. Some programs have reduced professional decisions to a minimum by detailed scripting of the teacher's role in delivering instruction. Very few programs require the immediate selection of activities and responses based on observation of student's strengths and needs during performance of complex literacy acts. Reading Recovery does maintain fidelity to a set of procedures that in the past have been shown to be effective in accelerating student learning; however, the selection, timing, and application of these procedures is a highly professional role. In this sense, Reading Recovery teachers are performing a role similar in complexity to emergency room physicians and the best trial lawyers.

Socialization versus Collaboration: A community of practice is defined by the standards and practices of the community. New members engage in a period of socialization as they become familiar with these standards and practices. Their participation is transformed as they struggle to use procedure to support children's literacy learning. Collaborative problem solving is the process through which new members learn to use the language, procedures, and practices of the community to support children's literacy learning and continue to refine that practice in subsequent years. The tension between socialization and collaboration partially arises from the constraints that the community places on the collaborative problem solving.

New members bring knowledge and expertise that both facilitate their learning and enrich the community. But a community of practice can't expand and maintain its identity if new members aren't helped to recognize and adhere to the standards of the community. Consider little league baseball as an example of a long-standing community of practice. It would seem unusual for new players or their parents to argue that because the child hit the ball a long way, it should count as a home run, even though it clearly fell outside the foul line. Players may argue whether a particular hit was fair or foul, but not about the concept of a foul ball.

The rules of the game can and do change gradually over time. Such changes have a major impact on the community of practice and are usually controversial. An individual or small group cannot make fundamental changes in practice and maintain its ties to the larger community.

In Reading Recovery, the lesson framework, the thirty minute time frame, the selection of the lowest students, and the basic need for individual instruction (rather than small group lessons) are some of the components that are basic to the community. We might argue about a particular enactment of some of these aspects, but not their role in the community.

Nature of Teaching

Training versus Inquiry: The term 'training' seems to

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invoke images of a teacher-directed learning process, while 'inquiry' implies a more individual or group directed learning process with a far less specified outcome (Rogoff et al., 1996). Within the Reading Recovery community of practice we refer to a teacher's first year as "teacher training", followed by years of "continuing contact." The initial emphasis on training mirrors the emphasis on initial socialization, with initiation in the standards of the community. But since demonstration lessons and group discussion are a central activity across the program, the shift in emphasis from training to inquiry is elusive.

Initial demonstrations serve to illustrate standard aspects of the community of practice, like the lesson framework, with discussion focused on the rationale for this framework. These demonstrations also emphasize careful and detailed observation of literacy behaviors as new members of the community develop shared ways of seeing and labeling literacy behaviors.

These constructs are the initial elements in the development of two theories which guide teachers' decisions in the program. The first is a theory of the child as a reader and writer based on detailed observation, with particular attention to what the child can do (Clay, 1993). The second is a theory of literacy learning and instruction. Both of these are tentative theories, the first changing continuously as a child's literacy abilities advance, the second changing rapidly across the initial months of training and more gradually later as new categories and connections among existing categories are formed or reorganized. These theories are graphically represented with one level of principles and related concepts in Figure #1 (Schwartz, 1994).

The interconnections between the theory of the child and our theory of instruction facilitate what Clay (1993) has referred to as following the child. Instructional decisions and actions are based on observation and interpretation of the child's literacy performance. While this is a general principle of instruction in Reading Recovery, there is no precise way to specify how this is to be done. Specific, detailed training is not possible. Group discussion during and after demonstration lessons helps link this knowledge into systems that support instruction.

This is authentic inquiry. The activity settings of our community provide maximum support for teachers to learn about literacy and literacy instruction. Group observation and discussion of lessons allow us to extend and refine our tentative theories that guide instructional decisions. The teacher leader, as the more knowledgeable and experienced member of the community, can support teachers' inquiry by focusing attention, by drawing relationships, by modeling reasoning processes, by clarifying constructs and procedures, and by assisting the group and individuals to take on these roles in the inquiry process. The teachers observing the lesson are provided opportunities to refine their theories within the authentic context of inquiry designed to generate insights related to literacy learning and instruction to support the teacher and student engaged in the demonstration lesson. This orientation maintains the collaborative nature of the community. If the discussion is perceived as just a vehicle for training, or worse as a critique of the teacher providing the demonstration, then the collaborative nature of the community is seriously compromised.

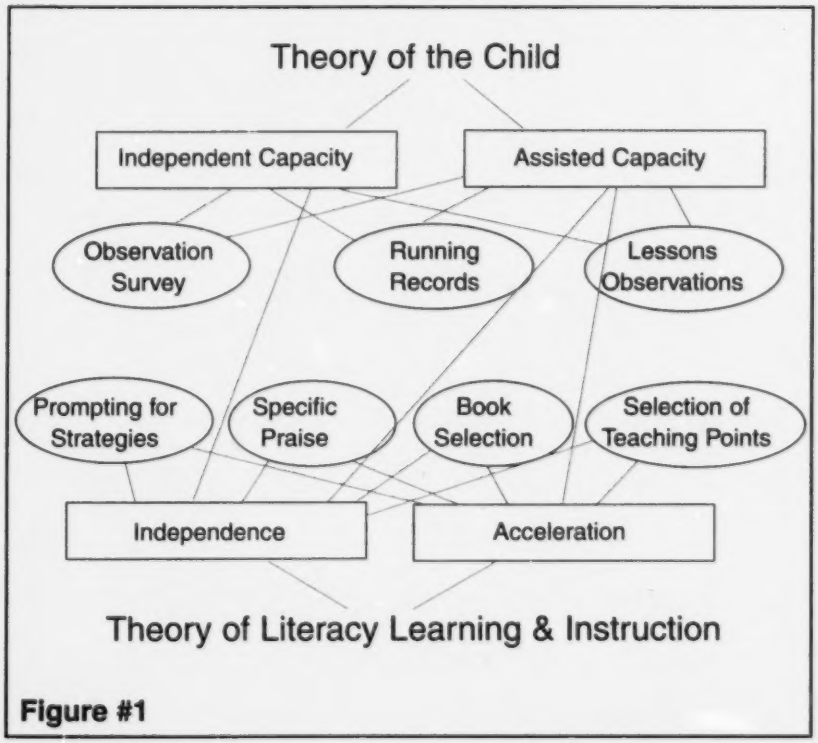

Figure #1

Conversation versus Interrogation: Given the number of problems that could arise within the inquiry setting, the teacher leader must act to foster and facilitate this inquiry. As a more experienced and knowledgeable participant, the teacher leader often takes the role of raising questions to stimulate the group discussion. While questioning can focus discourse on clarification of principles that organize our practice, questions can also serve as a test of whether group members can recall information previously presented or read. This latter use changes the nature of discussion. Brown and Campione (1994) note that "known answer, question-and-answer games" have no home in a community of practice environment.

A rapid sequence of these 'known answer' questions can quickly turn a problem solving conversation into a brutal session of group interrogation. The form of the questions themselves may have less effect on the inquiry

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process than the teacher leader's and group's response to those questions. A group may treat even the most open inquiry as interrogation if they feel the teacher leader has a single or preferred answer in mind. Establishing learning conversations within an inquiry community is influenced by many factors including the nature of guidance provided by the teacher leader, as well as teacher expectations, the manner in which new members were selected or recruited, teachers expectations prior to joining the community, and the balance established between socialization and inquiry early in the training year.

Nature of Knowledge:

Problems versus Answers: As teachers we believe in 'right' answers. Teaching would be easy if there were answers or rules that we could depend on across students and lessons to guide teaching decisions. Instead, Reading Recovery teachers face the constantly shifting problem of how best to support student's literacy learning.

Observing the frequency with which Reading Recovery teachers, teacher leaders and trainers refer to Clay's (1993) *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training*, one might imagine that all possible answers were contained within its pages.

The guidebook is read, reread, and referred to frequently. The guidebook contains information that is highly valued by members of the community. That this information is interpreted, reinterpreted, and some would argue misinterpreted, is critical to growth in understanding. The guidebook is compared, contrasted, and interrelated to other sources, most notably, *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control* (Clay, 1991).

All of these factors establish the value of the guidebook as a cultural artifact within the Reading Recovery community of practice. It is not surprising that such a valued artifact plays a central role in grounding discussion and problem solving within a community of practices where rapid socialization and professional development are primary characteristics.

The question remains; does a guidebook of this sort stifle creativity and change within the community? The answer is yes, and no. A community of practice that changes too rapidly soon becomes unrecognizable. Brown and Campione (1994) discuss this problem in relation to reciprocal teaching:

> If one looks closely at reciprocal teaching as practiced outside the control of the originators, however, the first principles of learning it was meant to foster are often lost, or at best relegated to a minor position. What is practiced are the surface rituals of questioning, summarizing, and so on, divorced from the goal of fostering understanding that the procedures were designed to serve. Teachers and students nationwide practice the "strategies," sometimes even out of the context of reading authentic texts. Rarely are the procedures modified and extended to enhance the learning principles upon which they were based (p. 265).

The *Guidebook* (Clay, 1993) and *Becoming Literate* (Clay, 1991) provide a theory and set of procedures with related rationales for this early literacy intervention. The procedures are not the only ones consistent with the theory, but they have been shown to be effective in producing accelerated progress across thousands of replications with children needing literacy support. Teachers can and should innovate around these procedures to achieve a particular type of processing shift if their best efforts to apply the procedures are not fostering progress for a particular child.

The danger in this type of innovation is that a procedure developed to solve a problem for a particular child should not then replace procedures that have worked for thousands of other children. Eventually, such a decision may be warranted, but the process by which such changes are instituted is a complex part of the culture.

As a community, Reading Recovery has worked hard to establish standards and guidelines that maintain the integrity of the community of practice as it continues to expand and replicate its successes in widely diverse settings. In my six years of experience within the community I have also seen changes, as the community works to refine understandings that are the basis for our practice. I have participated with others within the Reading Recovery community and the larger literacy profession to provide professional development to refine and enhance both Reading Recovery and classroom literacy instruction. The tension between established community standards and ongoing quality development is an integral part of a healthy community of practice.

Facts versus Transformations: The knowledge that teachers develop as they enter into the Reading Recovery community of practice is far more complex than a set of facts and instructional routines. This learning involves a complex set of interrelationships among concepts, observations, instructional procedures, and ways of interacting in the social settings of lessons and professional development. Lave & Wenger (1991) and Rogoff et al. (1996) describe this learning as a transformation of participation within the settings that define the major activities of a community of practice.

We see this type of transformation of participation as children develop literacy skills within the activity setting of our lesson framework. We teach for strategies, but children learn far more than we can explicitly teach. As they participate with us in the lesson, they increase both their independence and self-regulation on literacy tasks. This transformation of participation is what constitutes literacy learning.

Similarly, teachers transform their participation in the lessons they conduct with children. Bruner (1996) and Rogoff et al. (1996) have argued that our tacit theories of knowledge strongly influence our instructional efforts. This is true both in our work with children and with teachers. We know that just

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telling teachers what to do is not sufficient, as in a simple transmission model of teaching and learning. In working with new Reading Recovery teachers I have often had one or more teachers complain, "Why didn't you tell me that before?" The answer of course is that I often had told them that before, several times, but now they were ready to hear the answer in a way that fit with their developing knowledge of Reading Recovery instruction.

While telling does not preclude learning, the discussion of issues in the context of observing demonstration lessons provides a greater likelihood that teachers will construct new understandings that are linked to both principles and practices. The teacher leader's role in these discussions is to stress program rationales and literacy theory that help link observations, principles, and practices. As teachers engage with us in this problem-centered inquiry, they develop and refine the knowledge systems that enable and transform their literacy instruction. This system is further refined through reflection and self-management in teaching children to read and write.

The Reading Recovery community of practice is centered around the activities of literacy learning and instruction. The product of our community is knowledge and the process of production is shared inquiry. Children engage with us in inquiry about reading and writing, developing the knowledge needed to support their participation in the larger community of schooling. Trainers, teacher leaders, and teachers develop and refine the knowledge systems that enable and transform their literacy instruction. This knowledge is created within the activity settings of our community and our joint participation in other professional communities. Tensions arise as we extend and refine the shared knowledge and practices of the community and the individual knowledge of its members. It is the developing knowledge of the individual and the community that ensures that every experience carries its lesson.

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